

Why Bacup? A boring standard answer!

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Abstract. The anthropologist Jeanette Edwards sounds as if she is tired of the question, “Why did she do fieldwork in Bacup?” and the background commitments she regards as motivating that question, concerning what is an obviously legitimate place to do anthropology fieldwork. I present what is, or seems suited to being, “a boring standard answer” for the anthropologist at home.

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A book studying the English with a woman on the front

And a boyish man beside her, caught in her hunt

Why Bacup? Why fieldwork in Bacup? Why did you do fieldwork in Bacup? Why, anthropologist Jeanette Edwards, did you do fieldwork in Bacup? Why... Are you finding this annoying? Well, I suspect you are not alone in doing so. This is what Edwards – whom I hope you can distinguish from me, surname Edward – tells us:

I am often asked, ‘Why Bacup?’ A question which requires me, I always think, to identify some significant or special feature that makes it a suitable focus for anthropological interest... perhaps the question, ‘Why Papua New Guinea?’ is asked but it seems peculiarly irrelevant to anthropologists. Non-Western localities are deemed axiomatically of anthropological interest and legitimate areas of study. (2000: 8)

Soon she says:

...it seems to me that the question ‘Why Bacup?’ requires an answer which identifies a claim to special status. I usually point to the accidental and the adventitious when describing how I came to work in Bacup and emphasize that I knew little about the town before living there. (2000: 8)

There is an answer to the question which some may regard as “boring and standard.” Well, at least it is a response to the commitments which Edwards thinks are motivating the question: that non-Western societies are obviously legitimate places for a British anthropologist to do fieldwork; and Western places such as Bacup are not. I have not actually seen the answer explicitly stated before but it seems suited to occupying the role of a standard response, and I actually find it interesting.

Let us start with a familiar theory of how anthropologists acquire knowledge. They go to unfamiliar societies. People in these societies make different assumptions to them, such as that witchcraft exists or that, to achieve stability, there is no option for a society except having a king or other authoritative leader. Owing to this difference, this gap, they notice the native assumptions, which are often not stated, and can report them back to the community of anthropologists, whom we can conveniently conceive as all employed by Western departments, let’s simplify and say British ones.

This familiar theory of knowledge acquisition, this familiar epistemology, raises a puzzle about how an anthropologist can do fieldwork at home, in Britain say. An answer is that these gaps in assumptions exist within Britain too, between different groups of citizens. And in that situation the theory can be applied here as well, enabling anthropology at home.

To fill out the details, Edwards could draw attention to some differences between her background and that of the people studied. That would probably still leave the question of why Bacup rather than a council estate in Manchester, say. But if she is right about the commitments motivating the question, a response has been given to the puzzle of how

anthropology at home can yield knowledge, which (hopefully) overcomes the worry that Bacup is not a legitimate place for fieldwork at all owing to its Western location.

The reader probably wants an example of an assumption gap at home, amongst different groups of British citizens. Well, this is something I read in a novel:

That he had been Number Two at the Ministry of Defence didn't diminish him in my view, rather to the contrary. I had read enough Le Carré novels to know that, in the realm of Intelligence, as in so many others, number Two was in fact number One. (2021: 9)

For some years I at least walked around with the assumption that one is one and two is two!

References

Edwards, J. 2000. *Born and Bred*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Martínez, G. (translated by A. Manguel) 2021. *The Oxford Brotherhood*. London: Abacus.